

*When the Sky Falls*

By

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The author approves the photocopying of this document for educational purposes.

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## **SHORT ABSTRACT**

The Dust Bowl was the nation's worst ecological disaster, stripping farmlands and devastating the lives of American families during the 1930s. The narrative of this period exists in the personal retellings of individuals who endured it. Likewise, literature produced about the Dust Bowl has followed the movement of families out of the Great Plains. My research has collected first-person perspectives of the Dust Bowl in order to create a work of fiction set during this time period. This paper utilizes the experiences of real people in order to shed light on the struggles and strife that were endured. My thesis is a work of short fiction based in the Dust Bowl.

## LONG ABSTRACT

The 1930s were a troubling time for American families in the south: just as the effects of the Depression ravaged their bank accounts, their own land started to turn against them. The Dust Bowl was an era of dust storms that inflicted major agricultural damage to the American plains. The storms were caused by a combination of drought and lack of proper farming techniques and affected areas in Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles. Farming without crop rotation, cover crops and other techniques to prevent wind erosion caused massive dirt storms, kicking up an estimated five million tons of loose soil. Thousands of years of topsoil were blown away in less than a decade. This ecological phenomenon affected 100,000,000 acres of the Great American Plains and reached as far East as Washington D.C.

As readers, we can skim over these facts. We can try to wrap our imaginations around the idea of a million acres of land blowing up into the sky. The information we know about the Dust Bowl can be regurgitated in an essay, giving us a vague notion of this period's position in history. However, when we dig up the voices of those who endured this disaster we find the real narrative of the Dust Bowl. Through hearing survivors' stories of this dark time, we learn about the real situations they were forced to endure. My thesis is a testament to these people and the hard times they went through. Although fiction is not historical truth, it can be used to show us characters, situations, themes and ideas we can learn from and apply in real life.

“When the Sky Falls” is a fictional story that pits man against nature against industry. When all three converge—the story climaxes, and the resolution is left as open to interpretation as the margins of history.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
WHEN THE SKY FALLS	
CHAPTER ONE: LAND, GRACE.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: DOWSER.....	9
CHAPTER THREE: HARVEST.....	12
CHAPTER FOUR: RISE UP.....	17
CHAPTER FIVE: DUSTERS.....	20
CHAPTER SIX: COLD.....	22
CHAPTER SEVEN: DUST AND POWDER.....	26
CHAPTER EIGHT: WHAT’S LEFT.....	29
CONCLUSION.....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	36

## INTRODUCTION

The Dust Bowl was the worst ecological disaster in American history. While the storms destroyed millions of acres of property and capital, we have the oral histories of a dying generation who lived through it. Literature has been produced over this period, however these stories generally center on the families who escaped the disaster. Few authors lived through the Dust Bowl themselves, therefore they could not write from the perspective of farmers who endured these tough times. My thesis is an attempt at taking this unique historical perspective of living through the Dust Bowl, and rendering it in a short fictional story that will evoke the themes and paradigms of the period.

When I was in second grade I wrote a superhero comic book series, generating several issues a week, all of which had been carefully archived by my grandparents for years. My grandfather, a former marine corpsman full of stories of his past, reminds me of this collection every time I see him. His tales of World War II and growing up shoeless in Birmingham, Alabama stimulated in me an early fascination with history, and the personal stories of people who lived through difficult times.

Growing up with dirt blowing in my face each morning, Lubbock's environment certainly affected my decision to research the Dust Bowl. In a 2013 Weather.com poll, Lubbock was voted the "Toughest Weather City" in America. Similar lists have praised Lubbock as one of the windiest cities in the country. In fact, I made the decision to write a piece about the Dust Bowl after a sand storm in October 2011 cast the city's sky a dark red. As a creative writing major with a concentration on fiction, I was constantly searching for new worlds to place my characters in. The opportunity of writing a historically-based piece also contributed to my decision to minor in History.

My research started in the archives of the Southwest Collections Library on Texas Tech campus. I listened to reel-to-reel recordings of Dust Bowl survivors, and was immediately struck by the rigidity to which they responded to their interviewer's prompts. When the reporter asked a deep, resounding question like, "how did you live through those dark days?" the farmers would respond simply, that "they just lived." They had attitudes of inhuman hardiness, but still spoke with more wisdom and insight than the reporters who were interviewing them. Their stories were described with such vivid and unique details; it became chillingly clear to me the darkness these people had to endure.

Certain situations in "When the Sky Falls" such as the kids playing chicken in the "Dusters" section were inspired by actual anecdotes told in a reel-to-reel interview of a farmer from Dumas. The voices of these old farmers and businessmen largely inspired the characters that I develop in "When the Sky Falls." Later in my research, I even had the opportunity to help conduct a live interview with Bruce Isom of Idalou, whose own perspectives on the Dust Bowl contributed to the theme behind my piece. Hearing these reflections on a dark time led me to the goal behind my work of fiction: to depict a character as real and resilient as these interviewees.

My notes and transcriptions of interviews generated my first piece on the Dust Bowl, "Black Blizzards." The piece was by and large an essay, with incorporated dramatic scenes inspired by the stories in these interviews. Each fictional scene was meant to do what the numbers of the essay could not convey: the emotions and struggles of the people enduring the Dust Bowl. I presented "Black Blizzards" at the Great Plains Honors Council Conference. It was also featured in a reading guide for incoming Texas Tech freshmen. The essay was not only an exercise in research and collecting information on the topic of my research, but also allowed me the creative liberty of writing these fictional scenes that became the basis for my thesis. The use

of interviews also became especially important to the creation of my characters, as their language and syntax were utilized in their fictional voices: I wanted to show the rhythm and the tone that these Dust Bowlers had. I even took some of the anecdotal phrases from interviews and dropped them into my character's dialogue—to add to the legitimacy of my language. My desire was to go beyond showing their conversations as simple dialogue, I wanted the reader to visualize the dirt in their voices and see their suffering on the page. I wanted to go beyond the information presented in my essay; I wanted to give the reader an opportunity to empathize with a character as real as the Dust Bowl.

Creating the fictional world in which “When the Sky Falls” exists was the most challenging part of my thesis. I had to build a community with words, rather of falling back on the information in my research essay. Since I had a real fear of starting with a blank Word document, I began my story by filling a journal with timelines, Venn diagrams and notes planning out each character. Every page of my journal listed descriptions, characteristics, wants and goals of characters in the context of the story. I used diagrams to compare and contrast the protagonist with the antagonist, displaying a balanced difference in their personalities yet instilling a magnetic attraction between them. My timelines included information prior to the context of the actual story, implicating the predetermined background of each character as well what brought them to their present location in the story. I knew what my story was: my notes were used to hypothesize how to get it on the page successfully.

The characters of D.L. Johnson and Ezra Verbena required some external research, as their histories are not all present in “When the Sky Falls.” This diagramming of characters and plot gave me the blueprint from which I could launch my story. Through creative writing workshops and many hours of editing I started crafting my story from the ground up. I utilized

the careful critiques by my peers and professors in tweaking and reworking particular scenes. I used their comments in considering the legitimacy of my characters on the page, looking at their motives and language and refining every sentence that describes them. I decided to break the story up into eight sections to help pace the scenes of my piece. Each section is meant to build in the dramatic tension between Ezra, D.L. and the dust storms. After I had my story on the page, my remaining work was revising the material before me, a much less scary venture than starting from scratch.

When farmers came to the Great Plains to raise cotton, they were promised ‘Heaven-on-Earth’ by advertisements and propagandists, framing the fields of the plains as a Garden of Eden. When the land fought back, men felt as if they were deceived. “Betrayal of the land” is a phrase employed in works of historical nonfiction like Timothy Egan’s “The Worst of Hard Times.” Such themes of betrayal and promise are explored in “When the Sky Falls,” as Ezra Verbena soon realizes the consequences of cosigning his land. The reader can see Ezra and his family suffering and enduring throughout “When the Sky Falls,” and know the emotional and physical tolls the Dust Bowl had on farmers. My work with the subject illuminates the lives of these extraordinary people who endured a devastating time for Americans.

## *WHEN THE SKY FALLS*

### **1. Land, Grace**

Rows of shining wheat reflect a gold sun sky. Ezra Verbena sits on mesquite grass—his property, so says a signature on pamphlet. The low rolling grassland a prospector from Floyd County called “first class country.”

A waft of hot grain stirs up Ezra’s mind. “Mara should be ready with supper,” he whispers to Samson, placing another sheaf in the mule’s pack. Samson gazes at the dugout far down the dirt road and wheezes. The mule shits while trotting a few paces, the crap dropping slowly on the farmer’s felled stalks. Ezra grabs and flings pieces of the warm mule cakes into his field: one-hundred acres of glowing wheat and cotton.

Light tumbles from yellow to red to blue across the wide-brimmed plain, and a dark figure approaches the farm. It lumbers past the farmer and mule, a black vehicle tossing up the dirt road. Ezra mutters *damn, damn, damn*.

The Studebaker’s white wheels pull it inches away from the farm gate. A suited young man emerges from the automobile as Ezra walks swiftly to the other side of the gate. The man pulls back his sleeve and peers down at a prosperous wristwatch.

“Can I help you?” Ezra shouts at the man.

“Good evening, Mr. Verbena,” the man says, lifting his bowler cap. “This is quite a field you have here.”

“How you know my name, kid?” Ezra says.

“I know you,” the man responds without a pause, smiling at Ezra, “from hearsay mostly. The town is bustling with rumors of your record harvest.” He turns to Ezra’s dugout. “How has your family been keeping up?”

“Who are you?” Ezra says, motioning the man forward with a hand.

“D.L. Johnson,” the young man says, offering his palm to Ezra. The farmer looks down at his own dirty hands and nods. A flock of mockingbirds soar above the two men standing silently on either side of the gate.

“Well mister, I’ve got a crop to tend to,” Ezra says, brushing his hands on his overalls. “If you’re here for business I have to tell you now this is a family farm. I ain’t interested in investitures or any of that.”

Samson bucks and brays as D.L. looks at his shining wrist once more, lightly tapping the face of the watch. “Mr. Verbena, come take a ride with me,” D.L. says as Ezra grasps Samson’s reigns.

Ezra smacks the mule and points to the white wheels of the car. “Can that thing move faster than Samson here?” The farmer stares and stares at the Studebaker. D.L. smiles and says *certainly*.

“So Ezra... I can call you Ezra right?” D.L. says, patting the farmer on the leg as they ride in the Studebaker, rocking down the dry farm road.

“I reckon you may,” Ezra says back.

“You have built quite an empire here. Your family must be proud,” D.L. continues. The backcountry opens up before them like a book: farms burst with white bulbs of cotton, seas of ripe wheat stalks sway in the uneasy wind. The bronze sun settles on the scene like the smiling eye of God.

“This car ain’t used to dirt roads I take it?” Ezra says, his voice stammering from the rough ride.

“No Ezra, I’m afraid the Studebaker was made to ride on,” the car jolts D.L. nearly out of his seat, “...pavement.” D.L. smiles and looks ahead at the pastures before them. An open field of sun-burnt crabgrass houses a crowd of cows. The dreary eyes of the animals cast over the Studebaker and a few suckling calves bleat at the vehicles noisy passing.

“I love this land,” D.L. says. “They call it God’s golden country in Washington. It’s every political man’s dream to own land down here.” He laughs and looks over at Ezra. “But only real men break this land Ezra.”

The farmer watches yellow dust clouds caressing the dimming fields. He clutches his knee as they drive toward the dusking horizon.

The Studebaker stops before a field hundreds of acres away from Ezra’s farm. A team of sharecroppers finish up their labor in the field, sweat dripping off their black bodies. D.L. clears his throat and opens the car door.

“The hell you think you doing?” Ezra calls out as D.L. approaches the workers. D.L. puts his hands on his waist and looks back to Ezra.

“Is this what you want Mr. Verbena?” he calls out. The sharecroppers ignore the presence of the suited man coming to watch their work. Ezra comes to D.L.’s side and scans the worn souls out in the field.

“Is this what your family wants?” D.L.’s hazel eyes search Ezra’s overalls. “Shit on your hands? Shit on your clothes? It’s a line of work for...these people.” The sharecroppers start to notice the two men watching them from the road. Their dark eyes grow wide with fear at the sight of a suit.

Stars freeze in the gloaming sky as Ezra walks away from D.L. and towards his home underneath the soil.

“May the eyes of Our Lord watch over us and bring this food to the nourishment of our bodies, Amen,” Mara Verbena says, her head lowered before their meal.

The Verbena family looks down to see the nourishment on their plates- a mush of rice and beans with a sliver of beetle-black bread. Jack dips his bread into the mixture and spreads the food across his plate in broad strokes. Mara looks at her plate with her hands frozen and folded.

“Don’t fool with your food, son,” Ezra says, dabbing his chin with a rag.

“Who came by today, Ezra?” Mara says, looking at her husband: sweaty muscles perched delicately over the plate.

“A man,” Ezra says chewing softly, “from the city.”

“Oh,” she says, lifting her water to her lips. “What did he want?”

“Was he with the school?” Jack chimes in, his voice fluttering. Ezra’s plate is clean.

“He was a business man.” Ezra states. “All he wants is money.”

“You know who has lot of money?” Jack eagerly motions the subject forward. “Dale’s daddy. He’s a physician in town.”

Mara removes her silverware and brings the plate to the back porch– dropping the food into the pig’s slop. She nearly traverses the entire house in several long strides, as the kitchen and dining area comprise the majority of the living space, aside from the family’s tiny room for sleeping and praying. Ezra constructed the dugout in the matter of months, using wood and tin he bought with a loan. He finds his wife sitting on the porch with her hands covering her face.

“We have nothing left in the pantry,” she says.

“Mara, we are about to have a harvest. The best I have ever seen,” Ezra says, standing behind her. Fields of wheat surround their dugout, whispering like a quiet chorus.

“Jack’s shoes are worn to the sole.” Mara looks up at her farming husband with swollen eyes. “Why can’t we even provide him shoes? He walks to school every day.” She continues in a harsh whisper. “We need money. We need food in the pantry. We are dirt poor. Our son cannot live this way.”

Ezra walks off the porch and stands in the soil. He picks up a yellow dandelion: a miserable crop, an unwanted weed. Ezra snaps the stem with his strong fingers and turns to Mara. “We must be patient,” he says.

Mara lifts the back door, as she enters the sunken house she says, “Ezra, a man should know his place, as a provider.” She closes the door quietly.

A gust of wind kicks dirt into Ezra’s face, he yells as a hot gash of blood streaks across his cheek. He turns to see a tumbleweed, black as steely barbed wire, blasting against the dugout.

## **2. Dowser**

Ezra places his hands on the side of the dried-up well. He pounds his fist in a slow rhythm against the structure’s mouth: a dirge that resonates down in its hollow, barren belly. The sky is too overcast for Ezra to see the bottom of the well.

The rider trots in from West Motley at noon. Dirty wind sprays in fits as Ezra waves a shaky white horse to a halt while a man older than Methuselah tries to dismount the saddle.

“Bad weather,” Ezra says, grabbing the stirrups, but Methuselah grunts. “Tell me what I don’t know Verbena,” he says, his frozen eyes casting over Ezra. A cold slices into the farmer’s chest before the old man descends from the horse.

A wild gust flies between them, sending the old man into a coughing fit. “Damn be this West Texas wind,” he says, sipping from a hidden flask, “it shakes a man down to his soul.”

Ezra pats his pockets as the old man examines the farmer. “You’re looking scrawny Ezra. Mara been cooking up cow pies again?” he asks. Ezra laughs and nods. “You can’t keep your mouth shut, can you Seth?” He pats Seth’s eviscerated arm.

“Well, this work ain’t gonna do itself,” Seth says, the old man opening the bundle slung across his wasted horse. He pulls out a wishbone-like metal rod, grabbing the ends of the rod so the long dowel in front guides him as he leads a lonely procession across the farm.

“This here’s fine land you got here, Mr. Verbena,” the old man says, pulling his bad leg behind him like a plow. “Good soil.” Seth shifts around the dugout and toward the back barn while pausing near the old dried up well. He looks down the cavernous opening and shakes his head from side to side.

When he stops again it is fifty yards out from Ezra’s barn. Seth taps the chocolate soil. “Here’s the spot for your windmill Verbena,” he says. “Fine elevation for these parts, and the water should be a hundred and twenty feet deep.”

Ezra pulls out a bank note. “Good, I’ll call some boys from town to set up the kit. You know any reliable hands?” Ezra asks, the bank note fluttering with the wind as Seth turns to observe the farmer’s crop.

“You know, this is what the government would call first class land,” Seth says, casting his cold eyes out on the country, his long thinning hair blowing about his head. “I’m surprised you ain’t got prospectors knocking on your door every day, Verbena.”

Seth the dowser grabs Ezra the farmer’s hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, as usual,” Seth says and takes the bank note with a crooked smile.

After he leads Seth back towards town, Ezra goes back to the dried-up well. He looks down into its empty belly. Ezra recalls his Sunday school teacher speaking something about hell being at the center of the earth. Ezra sees a light burning down there, soft and glowing like red coals.

“Ain’t much Mr. Johnson, but it’s enough to keep out the wind,” Mrs. Jones, the owner of Motley’s only bed-and-breakfast says. She licks her lips as she shows the new young tenant the luxury suite: a feather bed, desk and gas lamp all roped in fifteen-by-ten foot quarters.

“This will do, Mrs. Jones.” D.L. flashes a wry smile.

“Well holler at me or my grandson if you need anything,” she says, bowing, “It’s our pleasure to serve.”

D.L. made it to Motley at dusk, his Studebaker sticking out in the little village like a Henry Ford in a chicken coop. He drops his briefcase on the desk stool and sits on the sunken feather mattress, the brass frame cold against his neck.

“Is there nowhere in this place to hang a goddamn coat,” he asks the room. He sighs and finds a leather-bound Bible in a dusty drawer. He flips the Bible over and begins to write in his day journal: *Farmer is obdurate...first try a failure...* he pauses for a minute to let the ink dry. *One week until he agrees.*

As he writes, the grandson totters past the open door. “Son,” D.L. calls out. “Can you find me some company,” D.L. asks, handing the boy a five dollar bill. “And I mean the right kind of company.” He smiles at the boy. As the child scampers off, D.L. sits on the bed and flips through the worn Bible.

Ezra sits in his wicker chair, chest hair exposed and moist from the hot night. He stares at the clock on the wall, a present from Mara’s parents. A polished cherry wood piece, embroidered with coiling Russian spirals snaking the sides of the ivory face.

“Protect my daughter Verbena,” Mara’s father would say in a whiskey whisper, the memory of their wedding night a fume in Ezra’s mind. “That’s all I ask,” he says, his eyelids sagging. “Protect her from this world.”

The uptick of the clock pulls Ezra back to the dugout. He watches the full revolution of the clock as he presses a thumb and forefinger to his head. A gust whips the night’s heat against the window, a loud howl echoes into the room.

### **3. Harvest**

Noah sweeps hair from tile to tile across his barbershop as he tries not to notice the black Studebaker rumbling across the gravel outside. The government dispatched three men, two blacks and a China-man, to install that patch of gravel: the only non-dirt road in West Motley. Chinks kept complaining about the dirt, like all insufferable tourists coming through town. The project endured a sorry week to put down a patch of rocks.

*Why can't they keep their city shit out of these parts,* Noah thinks while polishing a mirror. The door opens, bringing in the dust and a slender young man in a suit. Noah keeps his head down, his glasses slipping down to the pimple at the tip of his nose.

“Good evening,” the man says, taking off his cap. “I hear this is the place to get my ears lowered.” Noah stares at the man’s shoes: glossless and clean.

“This where you can get your hair cut,” Noah states, placing a towel on the back of his barber chair. The man smiles and reclines into the chair with a sigh. As Noah applies shaving lather to his brush, his new client swivels the chair around to face the barber.

“This is my first time in town, how rude of me,” he says, raising a hand from underneath the towel. “D.L. Johnson,” he says, extending his hand at Noah.

“Noah,” the barber responds, limply taking the young man’s palm. “Welcome to town,” he says, turning the chair back towards the mirror.

Noah applies shaving cream across the young man’s stubbled face. Noah usually asks his clients to be quiet, but D.L. reeks of privilege and money so he lets the banter continue. Noah fancies he can use an extra quarter to buy his wife a color magazine— with their pages full of words he cannot read and pretty women he can never have.

“Noah, what makes a man?” D.L. asks suddenly, foam dripping from his chin. The barber sharpens his blade on a leather strap.

“A good haircut,” Noah says, pressing his fingers on the nape of D.L.’s neck, but D.L. laughs and Noah nicks the gentleman’s neck. “Two cents off,” Noah says, attempting a laugh.

“Is it not the books he reads, the people he knows?” D.L. continues, his eyes widening. “His occupation, his dreams? Tell me - did you always aspire to be a barber?”

A portrait of Herbert Hoover looms over the two men.

“Well, my father wanted me to be a surgeon,” he says, pulling the blade across D.L.’s left cheek.

“That’s not what I asked you,” D.L. frowns and says. “I don’t want to know what your father wanted you to become. Lord knows mine never dreamed up my own life,” he says, closing his eyes again. The barber’s hands shake as he wipes the razor on the towel.

“We never quite turn out the way our daddies want us, do we Noah?”

“What are you getting at Mr. Johnson?” Noah asks.

“I’m saying,” D.L. turns his face up to the old barber, a hot red streak running down his left cheek. “Real men don’t follow their father’s paths; they build their own roads Noah.”

Noah nods and smiles and finishes the haircut.

Ezra drifts through his twilight field as tall wheat stalks scratch the farmer’s bare arms like tough bramble. By his side again is Samson the mule, grunting while Ezra whistles Brahms’ Hungarian Dance.

The full-bellied moon drips a white glow as night gusts rustle the full acres of crop, whipping the grain to attention like a battalion of wild hunters. Ezra sees them: broad-shouldered warriors atop their phantasmal horses. Teams of wraiths steadied under the milk moon as their gaunt, red-eyed beasts pierce him with their gaze.

Ezra stares back at the darkness and the wind and the broad field around him. Samson brays as the farmer lifts his scythe to the harvest sky.

D.L. Johnson had come again the day before. Mara watched the two men talk in the kitchen and made the visitor black coffee. D.L. sipped his drink in the family’s cleanest tin mug.

“Your wife’s hospitality knows no bounds, Mr. Verbena,” D.L. said, smiling at Mara as she swept the hearth, blushing. “Quite a keeper,” he continued, taking the coffee in heavy slurps. The young businessman observed the shack with humble admiration; taking a quick inventory of the gas lamps, potbelly stove, rag-insulated windows, dirty boots, farming implements and an ugly grandfather clock with a black instrument case tucked behind it.

“Your offer is mighty generous Mr. Johnson,” Ezra said after a minute, his arms folded, “but my decision is final. I wish to keep this farm under my family’s name.” Mara left the dugout, allowing the screen door to thud loudly behind her. D.L. set the tin mug on the kitchen table and wiped his mouth against his shirtsleeve.

“I built this farm with my hands, Mr. Johnson,” Ezra said, his voice quivering as D.L. reached into his coat pocket. “And I don’t know if a man of your...stature can appreciate the sort of work us farming folk do. This grain didn’t fall from the sky.”

D.L. pulled out a red kerchief folded around a cylindrical object. “Would you mind, Mr. Verbena?” D.L. asked, unfurling a cigar. “Mara’s got asthma from the dust,” Ezra pleaded, but the young businessman had already struck a match. “She just went out, did she not?” D.L. said, sucking vigorously at the end of the cigar.

“My apologies, Ezra,” D.L. said, “but this brand is particularly hard to come by around these parts.” He took three long puffs and watched the fume climb up to the scrap metal ceiling of the dugout.

“I understand your concerns, Mr. Verbena. You have put your life into this farm.” The young man removed his hat and craned his lean neck over to the farmer. “And there’s a lot to your pride that I cannot myself comprehend.”

D.L. leaned in close, smoke pluming under his baby face. His voice dropped to a whisper, “However, I must tell you. From a strictly business point of view: you’re sinking your family into a steady grave. You cannot solely support them, Ezra. You are but one man,” he said, leaning back into his seat, smiling at the smoldering end of the cigar. “But you farmers are obdurate types ain’t you?” D.L. erupted into a barbed laugh.

“When I was barely in knickers, I had a dog named Sadie,” he said, watching the burning glow, his smile growing. Ezra looked at the dirt on the floor. “She was a good bitch, but she never learnt anything new. She couldn’t shake, she couldn’t fetch, and what good is an old dog that won’t learn any new tricks, Ezra?”

D.L. extinguished the cigar in the tin mug and placed an envelope on the wood table. “Well, I’m afraid my visit seems to have gone long overstayed,” D.L. said, extending a hand.

“What’s in there?” Ezra pointed to the white envelope next to the smoking tin cup.

“It’s for you, Mr. Verbena,” D.L. said, his hand hovered between them like an open gate, “If your heart ever changes.”

Ezra shook his hand, and D.L. left as he came: without welcome or grace.

Ezra’s midnight harvest begins with the farmer chopping wheat under the white moon. Circles of stalk form around the farmer, desperately cutting against his time. He lunges and splits and slices the wheat.

Ezra sees the army of hunters circling about, holding him captive with their devil gazes.

It is the wild hunt; it is the new moon’s harvest.

#### 4. Rise Up

On a bright blue Sunday, Ezra rides with his family to the First Baptist Church a few miles south of West Motley.

The Divine Grace of God Catholic Church was first established in West Motley by Spanish Missionaries. It served as a place of worship for farmers and their families after the Spaniards left the building to decay. The crucifixes were removed, stained glass smashed and alters deported as the church became the First Baptist Church of West Motley.

Dust devils dance about the clapboard building and slip through the open doors as a flood of men in clean overalls and women clad with stiff summer dresses enter the church. Mud-mucked windows look out to the farms and fields- kingdoms of the families who populate the worship hall weekly. Ezra ties up the horses and squints at the resplendent white church.

“Great day for praying,” he says as Jack looks up at the powdery horizon. Mara dusts off the boy’s shirt.

“Where is heaven if there’s no cloud out today?” Jack asks, fidgeting at his mother’s touch. Ezra frowns and looks down at the boy, then at Mara.

“Well Jack,” she explains, “angels are invisible that’s why we can’t see them. God and Jesus are up there whether the skies are clear or dark as night.” She grabs Jack’s hand and Ezra trails as they join the fold of parishioners.

The Sunday crowd overwhelms Ezra. Everyone comes to shake his hand, pat his back- *How is the crop? How about that rain? How’s this beauty? How’s this little guy?* A sea of questions from sun-burnt faces that smile and smile and smile. Ezra takes off his hat as an elderly

usher coughs into a handkerchief. “Thank you, Verbena. This ain’t the farm, no need for that,” the usher says in a sandy voice.

“Is that Mr. Johnson?” Mara asks, pointing to a dapper young man keeping to the edge of the vestibule. Ezra looks past the gentleman and turns to Wes McDaniel.

“He’s waving at us,” Mara says, grabbing on to her son, “Let’s go say hello Jack.” Ezra watches her open up to the young man like a sunflower, her black hair falling on her shoulders as she laughs.

“I’m telling you Ezra, it’s the Russians. They’re behind this wheat depreciation,” Wes McDaniel says.

D.L. kisses her dark hand.

“Oh they’re behind this I swear. Ain’t Hoover’s fat fault, poor city boy,” Wes McDaniel continues.

The chatter of harvest and rain disseminates as the cracked bell announces the ten o’ clock service. The congregation files into the pews: the Adams family commandeers their section near the front; Wes McDaniel scoots down an end pew while Ezra, Mara and Jack sit in front of him. D.L. Johnson sits across the aisle from the Verbena family.

Sand shifts on the plank floors under Ezra’s boots. The vaulted ceiling stretches above the dusty heads of farmers, their hats clutched in calloused hands. Wives fan their faces with service pamphlets as Father Mann motions the congregation to stand.

The congregation opens their hymnals to “Onward Christian Soldiers.” They sing in the dissonant way that farmers do. Ezra hums the bass notes in a soft baritone as Father Mann proceeds to the front of the church.

“Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,” the congregation sings.

Jack leans back on his heels as Mara looks to the pew where D.L. sits. Ezra feels a cold sweat dripping under his armpits.

“...with the cross of Jesus going on before. Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe.”

Ezra stares at Father Mann’s white garments and smells steel and fumes.

“...forward into battle see his banners go!”

Smoky hills peer through windows and a faint whistle rings behind Ezra’s left ear.

“Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.”

The whistle crescendos through the next refrain, erupting into a deafening echo behind Ezra. He stares ahead at the white robe of Father Mann, dusty, like all the farmers’ clothes. A cacophonous sound rises to the wood beams of the church.

Father Mann asks the congregation to sit and Ezra walks out into the windless blue afternoon.

Sunday evening Ezra casts a lustful gaze over his cherry wood violin, nestled in its case. He fills his breaths with the dusty chalk of rosin and the dank, piney odor of the instrument. Stretching a snapped string up to the glow of his lantern, the cat-gut cord cuts the farmer’s fingers.

Mara enters their bedroom and sits beside her husband. They are silent for some time.

“It happened again today at church,” Ezra says, staring at the violin. “I had the dream again, Mara.” She touches his cold hands, too worn now to play the instrument.

“How can you be dreaming when you were wide awake, Ezra” she kisses his face. He turns to her and tries to form words, but he only whispers “the dream” over and over and over again.

The next day Ezra opens the note D.L. had given him: it contains a written receipt for a small tractor and a combine harvester. D.L. Johnson’s signature is scrawled on the bottom right corner.

Ezra walks out into the light and can see the dark figure of the Studebaker riding towards his farm, but it is tailed this time by two larger figures. Ezra drops the note on his porch and waits for the new machinery to arrive.

## **5. Dusters**

“You ain’t chicken, are you?” Jack Verbena grins, showing his yellow teeth. Dale Foreman shakes his head defiantly but glances at the darkening horizon to the north.

Dale whistles a ragtime song as the sun sets between the boys’ houses. Hairs on the back of Jack’s neck prickle as black clouds spread to the corners of the sky, darkening the setting sun. He breathes heavy as Dale continued to whistle the swinging song.

Jack’s father told him about the dangers of being out when the storms roll in. His schoolteacher had given all the students gauze dust masks to prevent sickness. The neighbors down the street from Dale and Jack had lost a baby to dust pneumonia a few months earlier; the tiny coffin buried in the backyard. But Jack was not about to look like a coward in front of yellow-toothed Dale Foreman.

Jack's whistling stops when a new sound comes from the north. A dancing black formation approaches the boys rapidly, screeching a terrible sound. Jack sees fear crawl into Dale's narrow eyes as the crazy shape twists in the evening sky.

"Let's go back inside, Jack."

"Dale." Jack's voice shakes. "there ain't any reason to— they just birds."

The flock of crows caws and screams as they fly away from them to the west. Dale clenches his fist as the wind starts to whip his clothes.

"Jack...Jack I don't feel right," Dale says, stroking his left arm.

The dirt hit suddenly and without warning. Jack looks to his left, but Dale disappears next to him. Jack keeps still as dust covers his entire body like a heavy blanket. Jack reaches out to grab Dale's hand and holds it tight.

Mara wrings her hands inside the dugout, frantically pacing about. "The wind, the wind," she mutters, wrinkles forming on her brow. As dust slams the side of the plank house, she dives behind her bed and clasps a Bible to her chest. Tears force their way through her eyelids as she rocks back and forth, singing hymns quietly to herself.

Ezra calls her name from the kitchen as a whirlwind of dirt hits the windows, the door, and the roof. He stomps into their bedroom, and tries to shake Mara from her terror. Mara does not open her eyes as Ezra shouts her name repeatedly. "Mara! Mara! Mara!" His voice, Mara's sobs, the Russian clock, everything drowns in a roar like a train coming straight off its tracks.

Ezra rises to his feet and looks around the trembling house. "Where's Jack? Jack!"

He runs to the front porch, the impact of dust outside erupting like bombshells. He pushes the door with his entire body, and goes out into darkness. The black wind tears at his clothes like the teeth of a monster.

Ezra calls out to Jack again.

The land flies beneath him, God using his invisible broom to sweep the farmer underneath the angry Earth.

“Jack, Jack!” he calls to the mad black curtain before him. The dirt penetrates his nostrils as he coughs up the dirty world around him.

Ezra waves his hand in front of his eyes, but cannot see the tips of his fingers. He scrambles further into the apocalyptic storm, continuously calling out his son’s name.

Then Ezra sees the figures of two boys from a distance.

He penetrates through darkness, the land nearly scooping back under the Creator’s soil. Ezra hears their smothered voices, like mewling kittens pitched to the side of the road.

His hand reaches out to Jack, and Jack takes it without question. He fumbles to reach for Dale’s hand but the boy launches out into the void of dust and darkness.

## **6. Cold**

“Freak weather,” D.L. Johnson says, admiring the tin blades of Ezra’s new windmill. “But these wild winds will only benefit you, Ezra.” Although the storm’s strong winds stripped some of the cover crops, Ezra’s fields remain mostly intact.

West Motley certainly did not gain anything from the dust. Noah’s barbershop was completely infiltrated by dust particles. The barber furiously swept his store until his straw

broom snapped in half. Abram the saloon owner closed shop for three days after the storm, cleaning glasses and tossing pails of dirt out of his windows until sundown. Father Mann could not be found for consultation or redemption. The entire town was in a frenzy as rumors surfaced that this was all “God’s wrath,” or “the rapture,” or “the devil’s work.”

Ezra lifts a pail of water from his well, grime and dirt layer the top of the bucket. He frowns and tosses the contents into his field, splashing D.L.’s shoes. The two men stand on either side of the well as Mara cleans the windows of the dugout. Ezra’s tractor rests in front of the dugout, its warm parts still clinking after the days work.

“You don’t suppose these machines are blowing up too much land, do you,” Ezra asks D.L. The gentleman takes off his shoes and shakes them over the well.

“Not at all,” D.L. says, “On the contrary, I believe the heavy machinery helps keep the land intact. There are scientific studies that say so.”

Ezra looks out to the field, threadbare after an intense harvest. A dust devil whirls in from the East, the miniature twister sliding silently through the cotton fields like a snake. “Is that so?” Ezra says, scratching his head.

He thinks about Dr. Foreman finding Dale at the edge of Wes McDaniel’s barbed-wire fence. The boy’s body crumpled like a clubbed dove against the fence: the flesh on his arms almost enmeshed in the fence. Dr. Foreman dropped to his knees and clutched the wire, his hands streaking hot red as he buried his face into the boy’s lifeless body.

Ezra thinks of this as he lifts another dirty bucket of water from the well and walks toward the dugout. Mara touches his face, clean-shaved and hot with sun. Ezra smiles at her and touches her burgeoning belly. D.L. paces around the well, writing swiftly in his notebook.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Mr. Johnson?” Mara asks. “We have a whole chicken and a pan of cornbread on the oven.” Ezra walks inside.

“I’ll have to graciously decline, Mrs. Verbena,” D.L. says, closing his notebook. “I have more business to tend to in town. But ya’ll have a pleasant afternoon.” He turns toward his Studebaker waiting by the farm gate.

“You’re rubbing off on him, Ezra,” Mara calls to her husband inside. She waits at the door, brushing back her hair as she watches D.L. drive towards West Motley.

Mara and Ezra sit opposite of one another at the dinner table with their food, two bottled beers and glasses of dirt-specked water in between them. Jack’s wheezing can be heard from the other room.

“He any better?” Ezra asks. Mara shakes her head no. “He’s lost a full week of school since the storm,” she says, glancing into the next room. “I think we ought to call on Dr. Foreman Ezra. This isn’t a cough or a cold it’s... it’s something else.”

Ezra thinks of Dr. Foreman shouting up at the heavens, clutching Dale to his breast.

“I’ll pay him a visit tomorrow,” he says, gnawing a chicken thigh. The meat, bread, and beer fill the farmer’s cheeks and flush his face. “Haven’t had a meal like this since our wedding,” he says, smiling at Mara. She looks down at the table.

“The harvest numbers are up,” he says. “With the tractor I can do twice the work in half a day.” Mara smiles at him. “That’s good,” she says, cutting into her chicken. “We ought to thank Mr. Johnson for his generosity.”

Ezra places his silverware down on the table. “Mara,” he looks at her with dark eyes. “We have only ourselves to thank for these blessings,” he reaches across the table to touch her belly. “And God,” she adds, her eyes bright and her mouth unsmiling, Ezra nods and blinks.

“Oh, we forgot to say a blessing!” she says as he falls back into his seat, his eyes glazed over. She lunges forward and grabs her husband’s hand.

“Dear lord, we’d like to apologize for not praising you before our meal,” she says, her eyes shut tight. Ezra stares at her half-eaten chicken breast.

“Please forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Ezra watches the Russian clock ticking on the wall.

“And keep watch over our blessings: Jack, the baby...”

“The farm,” Ezra interjects. Mara opens one eye.

“The *farm*,” she says. “And thank you for delivering us D.L. Johnson and his benevolence into our lives.” Ezra burps an “Amen” and they return to their meal in silence.

Ezra enters Jack’s room and sits at the edge of the boy’s bed. Jack’s chest heaves and rattles as he lets out a loose cough.

“Son,” Ezra says his voice thick like the Vick’s rub on the boy’s chest. “Dale was a good friend of yours I know.” Jack coughs and lifts his head, his eyes red and swollen. Ezra pats his son’s forehead. “When I was just a little older than you I lost a few of my best friends as well,” Ezra says, his hands folded back into his lap. “They were strong young men, like Dale.”

“Father, why did God want to take him away?” Jack sobs. Ezra looks down at his hands, softened by the relief from work the new machinery provided.

“He didn’t decide to take him away for any reason,” he says, “God doesn’t do things we always understand son. Sometimes we have to make our own decisions without God’s consent.”

“But why him, why him,” Jack says, his voice snapping as he pulls his sheet over his head. He rattles off three more coughs then appears again from underneath the covers.

“Did you lose your friends in a storm as well?” Jack asks.

Ezra puts a hand on his son’s head and messes his hair as he did when Jack was a toddler. “There was a storm when I lost them,” he says. “It was a big rainstorm. We were all together, then we were separated like you and Dale, then they were gone,” Ezra stops rustling Jack’s hair and blinks. “Gone,” he repeats. Then silence.

“They were soldiers Jack,” Ezra says. “Good young men are always the ones God decides to take.”

Ezra gets up to leave the room. Jack looks at his father, his eyelids drooping and says, “When you lost grandpa, did get to say bye to him?” Ezra shifts his body but doesn’t break the gaze between him and his son.

“No, Jack,” he says his voice in a whisper, and leaves the room.

## **7. Dust and Powder**

D.L. Johnson stands over the counter of the West Motley saloon, loudly tapping his wristwatch. Abram the bartender dries a glass, facing the young gentleman. This was not D.L.’s first time in his establishment, although West Motley already had numerous opinions of the young land proprietor.

“Definitely a fascist,” Noah the barber had said over a pint of dark brew the week before. “Talks about the destiny of man and what have you. Never had a guy stare at me with such a batshit crazy look before while talking about his daddy.”

“He’s a saint,” Dr. Foreman had said. “Came to my house a day after the storm and gave his condolences to Maureen and me.” The doctor wiped the tears from his eyes. “Ain’t ever seen a stranger so kind.”

Abram’s mother always told him he was a good listener, and that was the relationship he liked to keep with his customers.

“Can I get you anything, sir?” Abram asks. D.L. continues to stare at his watch, rapping it against the bar counter, sticky with tepid beer residue. D.L. rubs his hand across a pink scar on his cheek then continues to knock the watch against the counter.

Abram licks his lips and watches the browning sky outside.

“What’s wrong with this place,” D.L. says, dropping the watch on the counter. “And why does my watch not work?”

Abram leans his hands against the counter. “I’ll tell you what, this weather sure ain’t fair,” He says.

D.L. looks out the window absently. “It’s fouler than the Detroit skyline.”

Another patron enters the bar, huddled in a black overcoat and hat. He keeps his hat lowered over his face as he sits at the end of the bar, placing change on the counter.

“At least the hookers in Detroit weren’t old hags,” D.L. says, “Give me a whiskey sour, Abram.”

“I told you we don’t got that drink Mr. Johnson,” the bartender says, frowning with real dismay. “I can get you straight whiskey or whiskey with water.”

D.L. slumps like a child and says, “That will do.” He watches the man at the other end of the bar lowering his hat to expose a bald head and a long, acne-covered face.

“Father Mann,” D.L. calls, his face brightening. “Here’s our messenger, come in for a drink. Old Abram and I were just discussing the negativities of life, us lowly sinners! How about you give us some good news?”

Father Mann looks over at the gentleman, his eyes bloodshot. “The church is filled with dirt” the priest sighs. “My congregation is terrified, there’s dirt in my well the town thinks it’s the apocalypse.” He taps the counter for a gin. “How’s that for good news?”

D.L. fixes his eyes on the pastor while Abram laughs an uncomfortable laugh. “Do you really believe all of that, father?” he asks the pastor, staring him down.

“Do you really believe we are doomed to this? Is that the way a shepherd leads his flock,” the gentleman says, standing now, “off the cliff?”

D.L. walks over to the other side of the bar as the priest shifts in his seat, nearly stumbling onto the dusty floor. The pastor starts to cough.

“You don’t know the word of the lord Mr. Johnson,” Father Mann says, taking shaky slurps from his beer. “You’re just a city boy.”

The city boy smiles and clears his throat. “The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder,” he announces to the barren bar, “it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed, Deuteronomy 28:24.”

The pastor casts a stunned look over the bar to Abram who busily wipes the same glass once again. D.L. laughs and says, “All that Catholic schooling really cleaned me up. Come now father, let’s shake on our differences.” He extends his hand toward the priest.

Father Mann finishes his beer and sets the foamy glass down at the bar. He presses his fingers on his weary temple and looks out the door—the flag across the street at the courthouse steady in the evening breeze. The wind is calm as a ray of sunlight comes through the murky brown bar windows.

He shakes the young gentleman’s hand, but jolts back as he feels a static spark between them. Father Mann shouts and backs away from D.L., gazing at his hand. “I knew it, you brought this here didn’t you businessman,” the priest says, his eyes frantically darting towards the door.

The priest runs out the door and into the street of West Motley. He peers up at the sky: already dark with the evening clouds. D.L. walks to the door of the saloon and watches the priest gawk up at the sky.

The storm starts like a rolling herd of black cattle, its boom louder than a locomotive. The flag in front of the courthouse whips uncontrollably against the wind velocity and tears off the flag pole, launching into the sky—the stars and stripes forever and ever. The dust tears through town at a violent rate. D.L. turns to go back into the saloon.

From inside the bar, Abram watches a wave of black sand rising up from the north, only to come crashing down over Father Mann’s head, hands outstretched at the sky while shouting “Dust and powder! Dust and powder!”

## **8. What’s Left**

Before Ezra is a sea of white bodies, galloping and hopping across his field. He clutches a wooden bat in his right hand as the shuffling crowd of rabbits dart from left to right. Since the second storm, the plague of hungry jackrabbits came out to feed on the remaining crops.

Ezra grabs a rabbit out of the bunch and clubs its head with two harsh strokes. The gray and white fur of the animal sticks to the bat with a coat of warm blood. Beside him, leaning on his Studebaker, D.L. Johnson vomits at the sight.

“That’s barbaric,” the gentleman says. “I can’t believe you crushed its skull like an ape.”

“They’re eating my crops,” Ezra replies, picking up another jackrabbit by the ears, “Or what’s left of them.”

“Our crops, Ezra,” D.L. reminds the farmer, clutching a soiled handkerchief to his mouth, muttering, “how can you farmers live with yourself?”

“Survival of the fittest,” Ezra says, snapping the rabbit’s neck, “Read any Darwin?”

At the dugout, Mara looks at the patch of her dirt where her garden once lay. Since the day they moved to the farm, all she wanted was to have a small garden she could grow tomatoes in. During the harvest season she planted a few vines, but they withered after the first storm.

Mara’s belly is full now, and Jack smiles in anticipation for his new little sibling. “Sometimes we get the smallest blessings in the darkest times,” she says in a quiet voice to her son, listening to her belly.

To Jack’s additional excitement, school was cancelled until further notice, but his group of friends grew smaller as they trickled out of town with their families. Now not only were the business owners leaving, but the farmers were joining in on this exodus. Dr. Foreman and his wife were the latest to pack up their Ford and head west out to California. D.L. gave the couple a departing gift: a telephone to call when they were settled in.

Ezra surveys the desert beyond the squabble of rabbits. A few months prior, his land glowed with acres upon acres of golden wheat—his heaven-on-earth. The Garden of Eden was on the plains of North Texas, just like the pamphlets said when he moved to West Motley. Now,

the wiry remains of his wheat stalks poke out of sand dunes as high as his tractor. He spends his farm days cracking rabbit skulls and riding his useless machines over hills of dirt.

“This is some godforsaken country,” Ezra says. “You should just leave Mr. Johnson, take your machines back.”

“We can’t leave this place behind Ezra,” D.L. says his eyes growing wild. “We have a business here. Together,” he smiles. “Think of your family: your wife is pregnant. She can’t move in her state.” Ezra watches the sunset as another automobile appears in the distance.

“It’s like you say, survival of the fittest. We’ll be the richest folks to make it out of this Dust Apocalypse. Think of the news headlines! All we have to do is hold steady,” D.L. says, rattling off as Ezra watches a Ford car creep up his decimated path to the farm gate.

A well dressed, shrimp of a man in a straw cap steps out of the car, he introduces himself to Ezra and D.L. as a government official named Oscar Smith. “I’m here to look at your crop damage,” Mr. Smith says, glancing at the withered field, “and your livestock”.

“I’ll have you know sir, we aren’t taking any government handouts,” D.L. says. Ezra looks his business partner over: his suit, the same he came to town in is worn at the sleeves. His shoes are dull and caked with dirt, his wristwatch hung loose on the young man’s thinning arm.

“Johnson isn’t it?” Mr. Smith asks, looking over a notepad. “You’re Mr. Verbena’s business partner are you not?” D.L. nods an affirmative.

“And how are you holding up financially?” Oscar asks. D.L. grabs the government official by the lapel and says, “If I thought I had a reasonable chance and no one to get in the way, I’d go rob a bank right now.” He releases the man and walks toward the well. Oscar Smith dusts off his lapel with a disturbed look on his face.

“This dust makes a man crazy,” he says, looking to Ezra. “May we continue with this business?”

“Let’s go then,” Ezra says, and he and Oscar step into the tractor. They drive over small mounds of dirt and out to his livestock field.

“So, Mr. Verbena,” Mr. Smith looks down at the dirt, “what are you growing here?”

“Wheat,” Ezra replies, keeping his eyes ahead of him.

As they near Ezra’s remaining livestock: two cattle and Samson the mule, Oscar rubs his chin and whistles at the emaciated figures.

“Mr. Verbena, I can offer you twenty for the calf and cow here,” he says, pointing to the gaunt pair of cows. “But I cannot offer you anything for this mule.” He gestures towards Samson. “He’s going to have to be destroyed.” Mr. Smith places a check in the farmer’s hands. Ezra stares at the check in his hand as Mr. Smith walks toward the mule and starts to lead him away.

“Wait,” Ezra calls. Samson perks up at the sound of his owner’s voice, the mule looks at his beaten master and grunts.

“I will do it myself,” Ezra says, approaching the mule.

“You ever did this before Mr. Verbena?” Oscar asks him. “It’s not exactly a walk in the park for most farmers.”

“I’ve put down worse,” Ezra says, and takes the pistol from the official.

He leads the Samson out to where the wheat once grew. He gives him a pat on the nose and shoots two bullets in the mule’s skull, its withered body falling to the earth like a sack of bones.

Mara hears the gunshot and looks out the window. The dusking sky isn't clear enough for her to see the figure falling in the distance. A loud thumping comes at the door. Mara thinks of her husband as she grabs her Bible from beneath the bed.

She walks slowly to the door to let in D.L. Johnson.

"What a pleasant surprise," she says, her face relaxing, "Mr. Johnson you are always welcome here, where's Ezra?"

"I believe he is tending to some business with a government boy," D.L. says, placing his hat on the Russian clock. "I was just coming in to check on you two...or three," he says, smiling.

"Oh you know how it goes these days," she says, patting her belly. Jack lopes in from the living room.

"And how's this young man," D.L. asks, extending a shake to Jack.

"Dr. Foreman says he has something called dust pneumonia," Mara says, frowning, "and it will only go away with time."

"I'm sorry to hear that," D.L. says, patting the boys head.

"Where's my father," Jack asks, his voice a raspy murmur.

D.L. looks out of the window of the dugout and to the north. He sees the dark, dark clouds, rising like soot. "He's out there, son," he says.

Ezra walks away from the tractor, leaving the machine in the middle of his livestock field. He watches the clouds crashing in from the north, but continues at a steady stride. The land is calm and quiet for the first time in months, a serene silence where even the barren wheat stalks stand still.

Ezra watches the darkness sweep around him, the same darkness that nearly took his son away and buried his neighbor's tractor with dirt. The land starts to whip up sporadically from underneath him, chunks of soil barrage the farmer's back. The black sky of dust falls and becomes one with the moving land.

Ezra can see the grimy outline of his windmill in the distance, the blades spinning furiously as a blue static fire erupts from their tips. The flames lit up the darkness, for only a moment, as Ezra looks up in desperation to the heavens for the first time.

## CONCLUSION

As West Texas suffers through a drought similar to the years before the Dust Bowl, the exigency of my project contributes locally: by bringing to light a time in history that could potentially repeat itself. While Lubbock's current drought worsens, city-wide regulations attempt to combat dryness. Can regulations end the drought, or is the climate of the Texas panhandle too arid to fight? My project on the Dust Bowl introduces human perspectives to such contemporary, yet timeless, questions, while giving historical context to a present problem. Farmers working in the years of the Dust Bowl found that their techniques and farming practices were what made the hundreds-of-millions of acres blow across the panhandle so many years ago. Providing a creative perspective to a problem that is becoming increasingly contemporary will increase awareness among readers and scholars. With the recent Ken Burns documentary, a larger crowd of ordinary people are taking interest with the Dust Bowl and how it relates to contemporary environmental disasters. While the Dust Bowl may not be perceived as the most exciting of topics, an instillation of drama, tension, irony and strong characters can invigorate public interest. "When the Sky Falls" is meant to tap into this recent rise in intrigue over the darkest period in American history.

While Ezra Verbena's story may not be historical truth, his situation is thematic to a time when many voices were literally smothered by dust storms. The interviews I listened to were conducted decades after the actual Dust Bowl and certain recollections were hazy at times for many interviewees. We may never know full extent of the horrors these people had to endure, but we can go beyond mere conjectures and statistics. As a writer, I was compelled to bring this time in history as close to real life as possible. Ezra's life is fiction, yet his story alludes to the truths and struggles every human had to endure in the Dust Bowl.

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